CLAIMS:

1. Apparatus for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service at a particular purchasing time from a plurality of potential suppliers, the apparatus comprising means for determining or otherwise obtaining a total quantity of units of said good or service required to be purchased at said purchasing time as defined by one or more purchase orders relating to said purchasing time, means for accessing details of terms under which said good or service may be purchased from each of said potential suppliers at said purchasing time, and means for providing an indication of one or more consequences of allocating portions of said total quantity to be purchased among said plurality of potential suppliers.

2. Apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said terms are defined in contracts, with at least one contract being established in respect of each of said potential suppliers.

3. Apparatus according to claim 2, including a contract repository 200 in which details of each contract established in respect of said suppliers are stored.

4. Apparatus according to claim 3, wherein each contract is encoded prior to storage.

5. Apparatus according to claim 4, wherein each contract is encoded as a record prior to storage, each record including one or more of a unique contract identifier, a start date and an end date of the contract, a good type, and a delivery location.

6. Apparatus according to claim 5, wherein said terms are included in said encoded contract record.

7. Apparatus according to claim 6, wherein said terms include a volume discount expressed as a discount function, defining a discount as a function of a quantity of said good or service.

8. Apparatus according to any one of claims 1 to 7, including means for storing details of said one or more purchase orders.

9. Apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the or each purchase order is encoded prior to storage thereof.

10. Apparatus according to claim 9, wherein each purchase order is encoded in terms of one or more of an order due date, a good type, a quantity of the good specified in the purchase order, and a buyer location.

11. Apparatus according to any one of claims 1 to10, including a linking table for recording links between contracts and purchase orders.

12. Apparatus according to claim 11, in which an aggregated quantity of goods or services purchased in respect of each contract is stored in said linking table.

13. Apparatus according to any one of claims 1 to 12, including a procurement decision interface which provides a visual indication of said consequences.

14. Apparatus according to claim 13, wherein said procurement decision interface provides an indication of an average price per unit of a good required to be purchased, given that the total quantity of goods required at a specific purchasing time is allocated between a selected set of contracts in quantities prescribed by a user.

15. Apparatus according to any one of claims 1 to 14, including a data structure for storing a repository of demand schedules.

16. Apparatus for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service, the apparatus being substantially as herein described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

17. A method for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service at a particular purchasing time from a plurality of potential suppliers, the method comprising the steps of determining or obtaining a total quantity of units of said good or service required to be purchased at said purchasing time as defined by one or more purchase orders relating tosaid purchasing time, accessing details of terms under which said good or service may be purchased from each of said potential suppliers at said purchasing time and providing an indication of one or more consequences of allocating portions of said total quantity to be purchased among said plurality of potential suppliers.

18. A method for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service, the method being substantially as herein described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

19. Apparatus for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service at a particular purchasing time from a plurality of potential suppliers, the apparatus comprising an input for receiving details of one or more purchase orders generated in respect of said purchasing time, and for receiving details of contracts relating to purchase of said good or service, at least one contract being defined in respect of each of said plurality of potential suppliers, said apparatus being arranged to define a link between said purchase orders and related contracts.

20. Apparatus for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service at a current purchasing time from a plurality of potential suppliers, the apparatus comprising an input for receiving details of one or more purchase orders generated in respect of each of a plurality of previous purchasing

times, and for receiving details of contracts relating to purchase of said good or service, at least one contract being defined in respect of each of said plurality of potential suppliers, and a processor for determining from said details of said one or more purchase orders a total quantity of said good or service purchased in respect of each of said contracts at said previous purchasing times and for updating said total quantities in respect of each of said contracts according to an allocation among said plurality of potential suppliers of a quantity of said good or service purchased at said current purchasing time.

21. Apparatus for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service from a plurality of potential suppliers at each of a plurality of purchasing times within a predetermined period, the apparatus comprising means for receiving data representative of a total quantity of units of said good or service required to be purchased at each of said purchasing times, means for accessing details of terms under which said good or service may be purchased from each of said potential suppliers at said purchasing times, means for determining an optimal purchase decision regarding purchase of said plurality of units of said good or service based on a total quantity of units required to be purchased within said predetermined period and said terms, said optimal purchase decision being defined in terms of allocation among said plurality of potential suppliers of said total quantity of said good or service required to be purchased at each of said purchasing times so as to minimise a total cost of purchasing said good or service during said predetermined period.

22. Apparatus according to claim 21, wherein said terms include cumulative purchase discounts within said predetermined period.

23. Apparatus according to claim 21 or claim 22, wherein constraints are applied in respect of purchases from one or more of said suppliers.

24. Apparatus according to any one of claims 21 to 23, wherein said terms are defined in respective contracts, at least one contract being defined for each of said potential suppliers.

25. Apparatus according to claim 24, arranged to perform a search of possible allocations of purchases to respective contracts.

26. Apparatus according to claim 25, wherein the possible allocations are corner cases.

27. A method for use in making a purchase decision regarding purchase of a plurality of units of a good or service from a plurality of potential suppliers at each of a plurality of purchasing times within a predetermined period, the method comprising the steps of receiving data representative of a total quantity of units of said good or service required to be purchased at each of said purchasing times, accessing details of terms under which said good or service may be purchased from each of said potential suppliers at said purchasing times, and determining an optimal purchase decision regarding purchase of said plurality of units of said good or service based on a total quantity of units required to be purchased within said predetermined period and said terms, said optimal purchase decision being defined in terms of allocation among said plurality of potential suppliers of said total quantity of said good or service required to be purchased at each of said purchasing times so as to minimise a total cost of purchasing said good or service during said predetermined period.